# What Was Borges Thinking?

*Essay on Casares's The Invention of Morel*

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Casares's ***The Invention of Morel*** can be seen as a modern meditation on immortality or as a modern adventure novel bordering on the absurd. It goes over old ground [Frankenstein, Crusoe, Moreau] excessively striving to be provocative and new. The result is needlessly confusing and obtuse.

The island, like the first part of the novel, is not needed except as a throwback to Crusoe and Moreau, and the plot more closely relies on the Frankenstein myth. The characters' reconstruction, as much optical and illusory as corporeal, strikes us as less important than the author's nod to modernity. It's the machines that keep things humming. The plot according to Borges, in the same way as his own sensibility, is to be seen as "free of the superstitions of modernity"--though not of modernity itself!

The Dantean overtones are blatant, as is the relation to Goethe inherent in the name Faustine. Standing in for Beatrice, she becomes the narrator's imagined intimate, though as herself remains a sphinx.

Casares nevertheless steers clear of the Dantean dilemma, the choice between earthly debauchery and heavenly grace, even though these two causally connect to our two forms of immortality, a striving toward heaven or our descent into hell. Back to the mythical histories of God's grace through Christ's intervention, our modern concept of immortality is based on moral choice. Casares's evasion of this critical philosophical aspect makes the novel's reliance on the theme of immortality as much a prop as a dynamic agency. Too often in our entanglement in the novel's deliberate contradictions we find ourselves lost in what is no more than an artificial literary construct.

We are thereby left to wonder whether it was Borges's opinion more than the novel itself that brought about its general acclaim at the time of its release [1964]. In his introduction he asserts that "during no other eras have there been novels of such admirable plots as ... the one you are about . . . to read." Moreover he emphasizes that ".... the odyssey [itself an overstatement] the [author/narrator] unfolds seems to have no possible explanation other than hallucination or symbolism."

Fair enough, though he slyly evades any clear causal explanation, and instead obliquely refers to "a single fantastic but not supernatural postulate." This momentous but unexplained proposition is to be the agency by which we may decipher the novel's central mystery of Morel's invention, a mystery of humanoid beings projected by machines providing the endless continuity

that we may translate as a nominal form of immortality. In effect, if my reading is correct, humanoid holograms whose only reality and immortality are in the eyes of the beholder. Morel: "When I finished my invention it occurred to me, first as a mere exercise of the imagination, then as an incredible plan, that I could give perpetual reality to my desire." An insular, machine-generated second creation, analogous to the fashioning of Adam and Eve, is Morel's invention and the form of Borges's postulate.

In the end, however, we are hard pressed to know whether this or any other turn of the plot can truly satisfy this postulate. In addition to his personal admiration we sense a larger literary and national interest in Borges's excessive praise. He flatly states that judging the novel "as perfect is neither imprecise nor a hyperbole."

The book's popularity may therefore be seen as relying on two factors. After the war-related adventures served up by the previous generation of post-war writers had become commonplace, readers and literati were eager for a manuscript around which they could again close ranks. Add to this the French desire to be seen as a cultural vanguard, and voila, the manuscript found a strong and vocal base of support. This would not have reached its intensity, however, without Borges, at the time the arbiter of Latin American literature. His strong endorsement, I suspect, was given intentionally, to propel the manuscript and its author center stage at a time when readers and critics were eager for a new vogue.

How good is it? Not as good as the propaganda at the time of its release would have it, yet better than most of us are able to understand. In the end it does not sufficiently reward us for its difficulty.